ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 10

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Reagan White House: emphasizing teamwork over turf

Bush-Haig matter resembles earlier Sears-to-Casey switch

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President Reagan has sided with White House "loyalists" against would-be individual "turfists" in blocking Secretary of State Alexander Haig from the coveted White House crisis management role.

The President apparently has decided to risk Mr. Haig's resignation to quell contention in the ranks.

In this situation, Mr. Reagan is repeating the assertiveness evidenced 13 months ago when his fledgling presidential campaign briefly foundered after the Iowa caucuses.

The day of the New Hampshire primary, Reagan fired John Sears, his highly regarded chief strategist. Mr. Sears was seeking total campaign control, and the issue split the ranks of Reaganites. Faced with a choice, Reagan sided with an apparently meeker group of longtime loyalists rather than with Sears and his top two lieutenants.

After the firing, which was engineered by William Casey, who now heads the Central Intelligence Agency, outsiders expected a strong man to emerge to head the campaign. But that never happened. The "group" thrived, won the election, quarterbacked the transition, and moved into key new jobs as White House staffers, Cabinet members, and close outside advisers.

The "group" — most visibly the White House triumvirate of chief of staff James Baker III, policy overseer Edwin Meese III, and personal aide Michael Deaver, but also including others in Cabinet-level posts — again apparently has held its ground against Haig's thrust for power.

Observers say that in giving notice that team play must prevail over stardom, Reagan risks a diminished standing for Haig in foreign affairs and a too-explicit role as crisis manager for Vice-President George Bush in order to protect the more amicable group of loyalists on whom his leadership style depends.

For his part, Haig has signaled a strategic pause in his White House tiff. He told a Senate subcommittee March 26 that he would hereafter focus on the "substance" and not the "form" of foreign policy issues. "The question of form has been decided," he told reporters. Both Haig and the White House have stressed that policy issues have not been primarily in dispute.

Presidential and diplomatic experts make these points about the controversy:

● A president has the right to choose his supporting staff. As governor of California, Reagan turned to a six- or seven-member "inner cabinet" group to run the 30-odd state government departments.

● Historically, the White House-State Department struggle for ascendancy in foreign affairs goes back at least 30 years — "as if waged by two foreign nations," says Thomas Cronin, a White House scholar. Haig is faulted for pushing his case too publicly, too far.

● Most experts take Haig's side — as reaffirmed by President Reagan himself — that the Secretary of State should be chief formulator and spokesman for foreign policy. But they split on crisis management duties. To manage the Iran hostage crisis, the Carter White House relied on a working staff at the State Department, with White House operatives like Hamilton Jordan highly involved.

● Bush's past experience well qualifies him for his new role as crisis stand-in for Reagan. But in modern times, vice-presidents — including Walter F. Mondale — generally have not done well when given operational roles, experts say.

The concensus in this conflict-sensitive capital is that Haig is on the defensive.

"This is enough of a public slap in the face to Haig that you have to wonder whether he's going to swallow this, or creep back a little at a time, or whether we've seen the first thing that will ultimately lead to a resignation," says Austin Ranney, Washington affairs expert with the American Enterprise Institute, which has close ties to the Reagan White House. "It was clearly Haig's intention to be to Reagan's foreign policy what Kissinger was to Ford's foreign policy. This episode clearly and *publicly* means he isn't going to get that position."

The rebuke to Haig means "his position has to go down at least one notch," Ranney says, "that is, when he says something to a foreign head of state or foreign minister at least now the question will appear whether Haig is really speaking for this administration or for himself — in a way that doubt might not have arisen a week ago."

The verdict on granting the crisis pivot spot to Bush will likely have to await a tryout in an actual crisis, says Theodore Eliot, dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Medford, Mass. Mr. Eliot was former Secretary of State William Rogers's executive aide during the period of Kissinger foreign policy ascendancy. He sides with Haig on a lead role for the secretary in issues such as the Japan auto import talks.

But Reagan may be overloading Vice-President Bush with operational roles, warns Mr. Cronin, author of "The State of the Presidency." He notes that "the one or two times a vice-president has had managerial responsibilities, like Henry Wallace during World War II, it didn't work."

Early in the Carter administration, Vice-President Mondale was given an election reform package to shepherd through Congress. But, says Cronin, "Not one thing passed in his four years — not same-day election registration, electoral college change, campaign finance reform in the Congress — nothing."

Mondale also failed at a task of setting Cabinet priorities.

Vice-presidents lack the political base needed for an explicit portfolio, Cronin says. They do better in informal roles, like political fund raising and attending foreign funerals.

Cabinet members routinely "howl" when vice-presidents are granted too-explicit tasks. Cabinet officers have to testify before Congress and are confirmed by Congress — burdens the vice-president escapes. Constitutionally, says Cronin, the vice-president is really a legislative officer. He doesn't get confirmed by the Congress or go up for appropriations hearings. But he still gets his pay from the congressional budget.